The right inspection

Some people have assumed that the introduction of comprehensive performance assessment means that best value is ‘dead’. That is not the case. Councils still have a legal duty to carry out best value reviews and a fair proportion of the Audit Commission’s work will continue to be inspecting services on the back of reviews. Best value results will form a crucial ingredient in the overall CPA score.

The way that such inspections are approached will be very different, however: the top performing councils will get no inspection or performance audit at all for a period of up to three years. Those that are struggling will have inspections that are focused on individual actions and on giving practical support to foster improvement.

There is also an assumption that CPA will mean far more inspections – that it is the biggest brother of best value. This is wrong also. CPA work subsumes other audit and inspection - there will be no overall increase. It streamlines many aspects of existing local government regulation, and will certainly bring ‘lighter touch’ audit and inspection for many councils.

The corporate assessment inspections of upper tier councils we are carrying out this year can be seen as a collection of baseline data – the high volume of this work is unlikely to be echoed in coming years.

Local authorities have been playing a large and vital role in the development of CPA. The 10 upper-tier councils we have been working with as pathfinders have contributed enormously as testing beds for the corporate assessment element. Many more councils have contributed through reference groups, part as peer reviewers, and, importantly, responding to the consultation on the final draft methodology that we launched in March.

The consultation response was extremely positive. The considered responses we received back were evidence of both the importance of CPA to councils and the strong desire for a streamlined, more thoughtful regulation regime that looks at all local authority services.

Thanks to the input from local authorities, we have re-worked the methodology for applying CPA to housing.

Roy Irwin is the Audit Commission’s chief housing inspector

26 July 2002 Inside Housing 29